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Joint written statement* submitted by the International Organization for the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination, a non-governmental organization in special consultative status, and International Educational Development, Inc. and the World Peace Council, non-governmental organizations on the roster

The Secretary-General has received the following written statement, which is hereby circulated in accordance with Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

[2 February 2018]

* This written statement is issued, unedited, in the language(s) received from the submitting non-governmental organization(s).

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Attacks on Public Health Workers in the Syrian Arab Republic*

Introduction

What began as anti-government protests in Syria's capital, Damascus, in March 2011 has spiralled into a devastating civil war. Since the beginning of the war, an estimated 400,000 Syrians are reportedly dead or missing according to the United Nations and Arab League Envoy to Syria, over 5 million Syrians have fled the country and 12 million people are displaced internally. Over time, the conflict grew more and more complex with the involvement of the international community, Kurdish forces, terrorist organizations like ISIS and other opposition forces.

Public Health in Syria

Health is a fundamental human right. As stated in many resolutions including (A/HRC/RES/12/24) of the United Nations (UN), the right to optimal health is closely linked to the inherent dignity of every person. Regarding the Promotion and Protection of All Human Rights, Civil, Political, Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, resolution (A/HRC/RES/12/24) states the following: '*The Human Rights Council (...) Recognizes that access to medicine is one of the fundamental elements in achieving progressively the full realization of the right of everyone to the enjoyment of the highest attainable standard of physical and mental health.*'

Unfortunately, this right is not part of the reality for many. As the Syrian War enters its seventh winter, the consequences of this devastating war are far-reaching. According to the World Health Organization (WHO) 13 million are in need of humanitarian assistance while 5.6 million of these people face acute humanitarian needs. Throughout the continuous fighting of the groups on all sides of the conflict, there is a severe lack of the most basic needs. A shortage of electricity, fuel, clean and safe drinking water, and sanitation services, for example, have led to the outbreaks of preventable diseases such as typhoid, hepatitis and diarrhoeal diseases. Since the beginning of the conflict, over half of all health care facilities have been closed. Of the ones still open in 2017, the WHO reported that less than half are fully functional.

In 2013 and 2014 Syria faced a polio outbreak. Under normal circumstances, this disease is easily preventable. In order to stop the outbreak, the population immunity against the disease was raised through vaccination. The total number of reported infections in 2017 was limited in response to the campaign efforts to revitalize immunization services. According to the latest report of the WHO, issued on 16 January 2018, there have been no new cases reported.

Additionally, the alleged usage of chemical weapons by all sides of the conflict poses a threat to the health of the Syrian civilian population. Even though Syria did not sign the Chemical Weapons Convention, the country did ratify the 1925 Geneva Protocol. Moreover, the use of chemical weapons is a war crime, as declared in The Hague Declaration (IV, 2) of 1899 Concerning Asphyxiating Gasses, the 1925 Geneva Protocol, the Chemical Weapon Convention (CWC) and the Statute of the International Criminal Court (ICC). The first reported use of chemical weapons by the various fighting groups including ISIS as well as other opposition affiliated militias in the Syrian conflict was in 2012, but there is information that attests to its usage throughout the duration of the conflict.

Hundreds of thousands of civilians have suffered from conflict related injuries, 30 percent of whom are left with permanent disabilities. Many pregnant women are not receiving adequate care, which increased the already high numbers of maternal and infant mortality. Naturally, the groups suffering the most are those most vulnerable: girls, women in need of reproductive care, unvaccinated children, people with chronic diseases, the elderly, as well as, people in need of mental health and psychological support.

Restricted Access to the Besieged City of Ghouta

Ghouta, located in the south-west of Syria, is one of the last rebel strongholds. A siege by the government has led to severe shortages in medicine, food and other necessities. Currently, the city is still home to 400.000 civilians. In 2018 the death toll has risen dramatically due to bombardments, killing close to 200 people in January alone.
Only 26 percent of UN requested deliveries of humanitarian assistance to the besieged city have been approved even though it is clearly outlined in the Geneva Convention relative to the Protection of Civilian Persons in Time of War (IV) Art. 17, that the wounded and sick should be able to receive treatment by medical professionals at all times. Ghouta has been closed off to health workers and other medical professionals, and the people have not been able to receive adequate medication and medical treatment. Evacuation of some in need of medical treatment has been taking place, but most of the sick and wounded are left without treatment and medicine in the besieged city.

Attacks on Health Workers

According to the WHO, Syria is among the most dangerous countries for a health worker. Since the beginning of the conflict, 770 health care workers have been killed in Syria. During the same period, 147 humanitarian aid workers have been killed. Not only is this a grave loss of innocent lives, it also prohibits those in need of medical attention from receiving proper care. Attacks on health workers and medical personnel have occurred all over the country and have been carried out by all parties involved. In the Geneva Convention (I) for the Amelioration of the Condition of the Wounded and Sick in Armed Forces in the Field Art. 24 states that medical personnel should be respected and protected under all circumstances and at all times.

Throughout the conflict, airstrikes on medical facilities have been reported. Strikes in November 2016 destroyed a children's hospital in Aleppo and in September 2017, for example, destroyed the hospitals in Idlib, including a maternity hospital in the town of al-Tah, rendering the medical facilities inoperable and killing numerous civilians.

Recommendations

We, NGOs Signatories to this statement recommend to the United Nations and its relevant bodies to:

- Urge all parties involved to respect and uphold International Humanitarian Law (IHL) and International Human Rights Law (IHRL) at all times;
- Call for the immediate protection of all medical personnel;
- Condemn violence by all parties involved against health workers and civilians, and call for an end to the escalation in fighting;
- Call for the immediate protection of those who are wounded, sick or in need of any medical attention, and urge all parties involved in the conflict to allow them to be treated with adequate care and under safe circumstances;
- Call for the safe evacuation of those in the besieged city of Ghouta, Syria;
- Urge all parties involved to halt the usage of chemical weapons.

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*Geneva International Centre for Justice (GICJ), The Arab Lawyers Association-UK, The Brussells Tribunal, Euro-Mediterranean Human Rights Monitor, Association of Humanitarian Lawyers (AHL), The Iraqi Commission for Human Rights (ICHR), Association of Human Rights Defenders in Iraq (AHRD), General Federation of Iraqi Women (GFIW), Organisation for Justice & Democracy in Iraq (OJDI), The Iraqi Centre for Human Rights, International Anti-Occupation Network (IAON), NGOs without consultative status, also share the views expressed in this statement.